

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
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BARBARA LUETKE OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS

**INTERVIEWEE:** BARBARA LUETKE

**INTERVIEWER:** CINDY COLE

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** Today I am speaking with Barbara Luetke. It is July 27, 2016 in Shoreline, Washington. I am Cindy Cole. Go ahead, Barbara.

[00:00:23] **BARBARA LUETKE:** Well, I gave this talk as part of the annual Seattle Labor Chorus Thanksgiving celebration, and it's written to the chorus:

Thank you for teaching me to sing and for loving me. These are stories and poems from the last four years of my life since I joined the chorus. I hope you will see through these stories that it's not just the songs that we are singing. In part, we are changing the abilities of people like me. We are empowering. When you taught me to sing, I was able to sing with others in important ways and at important times.

## **“Learning to Sing My Heart,” March 2012**

I had been in the chorus about four or five months. There was not music in my home unless you count “Mack the Knife.” My parents only sang with our kids on the two-hour trip to my grandma’s house at Thanksgiving, “Over the River and Through the Woods” and the University of Wisconsin pep rally songs. I’m old enough, though, that we still had music classes regularly at school. Most of the songs we sang I had never heard before.

From [Margaret Strauss?] , my Girl Scout leader for over a dozen years, I learned that different girls could sing different words in different rhythms in the same timeframes. I didn’t learn that it was called singing in parts until I took my first elective ever, seventh grade chorus. Back then, at 13 years of age, I sang soprano. We always had the melody.

High school, college and marriage were pretty much void of singing. Even today, my daughter, Hannah, says that she has to sing Christmas songs to her new baby, [Trip?] , because she doesn’t know any lullabies.

Raising my four daughters, I sang children’s songs with them. My oldest, [Breathe?] , had a great voice and I envied her. I’ve always said that my little deaf girls sang better than I did, but the truth is that when my hearing girls weren’t at home, we didn’t sing. In the deaf culture, you don’t sing.

Yet, I wanted those girls to experience music, so I signed them up for Suzuki cello lessons for three years. Because of them, I interpreted for Pete Seeger, John McCutcheon and a lot of lesser-known musicians at Quaker gatherings so that my deaf girls would know song.

When I moved here to Seattle six years ago, I only owned about 12 CDs. They were all political musicians or the Dixie Chicks. Once in a while, alone on a long solo drive through the Cascades, I would sing loudly, happily, down the road, harmonies fluttering in and out like butterflies, but I just couldn’t catch them.

February 2011, I lobbied in Olympia with a Quaker group and I heard the Peace Chorus. A woman signed all the songs, and a thought began to emerge. Later—July 4, 2011—I attended the Fellowship of Reconciliation [FOR] conference at Seabeck, Washington. I picked a song workshop that turned out to be facilitated by Lou Truskoff. And, being from Madison, I was thrilled to the lyrics that he had rewritten in not one but two songs about [Governor] Scott Walker and the union busting that he had been doing there.

Before the session ended, the woman next to me—Barb Powers—offered me a ride to chorus. I was thinking I could provide access because I signed. It never occurred to me that I would sing. That first night at the Seattle Labor Chorus rehearsal, when I stood to introduce myself I was asked about my musical background. I sidestepped that question, saying that I brought great passion to the lyrics.

Geez, everyone was so friendly! I’m not even sure how I got to be an alto, I just sat down beside Barb Powers. As the rehearsal started, I realized my part. Alto. Hmm. It’s a lot easier to sing if the notes are in your range.

Plenty of people came and told me at the break that it didn’t matter that I couldn’t sing. I took my sheet music home and I listened to the tapes of just the alto part on VOX, the system that we use to listen to our music. Wow! The music went so fast! I tried to remember how to read music, and then I tried the option with all the parts. Oh my god! Where did the alto part go? Week after week, I would try to sing the alto part with VOX, but I just couldn’t hold onto my part, and I gave up. I kept going to rehearsals, though. I loved the community.

I've loved riding with Celia Matson. I loved her friendship. I would ask her questions all the way to and from rehearsal. What's a tied note? Why do we have to have them? Can't we just cross them out?

I'd arrive and plunk down in the middle of my section, needing my alto stereo sisters around me in so many ways. People would hand me copies of their music or lean over to drag a finger under where the hell we were, and I'd mimic people, circling notes with my pencil and write tips in my margins. Truly, I believe my sheet music became a work of art. On breaks, people would remember my name and invite me into their circles of conversation, and I felt included.

I was never more in the moment than I was at rehearsals, watching Janet Stecher move her body, wave her arms, her fingers dance and her lips mouthed the words. I loved to watch her incorporate sign language signs into her directions. That's my family's language, I would think, appreciating the comfort of it. She knows some of our language. And I would be grateful that at least for a couple of years I had made music a part of my deaf daughters' lives.

At home, I would imagine myself performing as I practiced. I wanted my friends to hear those words, see those faces, be swept up as I was in the conviction. When one of my friends, who had come with me to the first singalong, asked me if there were unions in Seattle, it confirmed that this exposure was a good idea.

When I heard the chorus sing ["Philandia"?] on a DVD, I put it in my will that the Seattle Labor Chorus would sing at my memorial. Every year I add more songs to my will.

The first singalong night, I was prepared to sing one of the songs. I kept thinking, as we rehearsed in the kitchen of the Senior Center, that someone would question my participation. But, apparently it was okay. I was part of the chorus. But it happened that when it was time for us to sing, I was working at the wine and beer table at the back of the room, and I was afraid to leave the money and come to the front, so I sang my part 20 feet away from the rest of the group. I surprised myself. I knew the alto part. It kind of felt like karaoke, not that I've ever done that. I wasn't ready to sing for the next few gigs, so I borrowed a Seattle Labor Chorus shirt and wore it to the events. I was an enthusiastic audience member.

I found the songs that we sang on YouTube and I enjoyed those versions. I discovered new artists, and I learned the stories behind the songs. At work, I typed out our lyrics separate from the sheet music, and I left them at my desk near my phone to memorize, and on the passenger seat of my car. I still have a lot of trouble remembering the verses and which are which.

I eventually bought my own Seattle Labor Chorus shirt. I joined my first performance, the Service Employees International Union conference. Who knew you were supposed to have a scarf and wear black pants? But once onstage, I fixated on a woman in the audience, and I watched her sing, and I loved looking up to sing those memorized lyrics to her that came surely from my heart to hers.

The next day, I was at Harborview Hospital. I asked the nurse if she was at the SEIU event the night before. "Yeah," she said. And I explained that I was in the chorus. "Oh," she said, "I loved that 'We Were There' song." "We were there, weren't we?" I said, realizing. And I did what I couldn't do the night before. I hugged her. Wow.

A couple of months later, we were rehearsing right before Folklife. Janet was coaching us. I started to write down everything she was telling us.

**“How to Sing and Live,” by Janet, May 23, 2012**

Be present.

Be attentive.

Demonstrate the behavior you want.

Practice at home.

Being strong doesn't mean loud, it means confident.

Make a statement.

Tell the story.

Admit the hard places.

Share the resources.

Compromise.

Engage.

Be real, not mechanical.

Sing like Perry Como.

Don't whine.

Be fabulous.

A little white wine helps.

When my mother died that fall, Thanksgiving 2012, I had never sang alone to anyone as an adult. My father had died two years earlier and I knew better what to expect this time around. My mom smiled from her bed like a happy infant as we took turns sitting beside her, and telling her the stories of our childhoods that she had told us so many times. She was able to talk a bit to each of us.

One night that was almost the last night, I was alone with her. It was late, and I was sitting in a chair beside her, my face very close to her face. I decided to sing the lullaby that played from the music box of my childhood stuffed bunny. Throughout my young years, she would take out the music box and the bunny, wash the bunny, replace the music box and hand-sew the bunny up again. She did this hundreds of times. When I started to sing the lullaby, she smiled in disbelief and asked, “Are you singing to me?” She liked that I was.

“I’ll see you in heaven,” my mother said. I loved that she assumed she was entitled to heaven, a heaven that I believe is here on Earth, and that she and the Seattle Labor Chorus helped create for me. I would have never thought to sing to my mother, to have that moment, that memory, without the Seattle Labor Chorus.

Two years ago I flew to Texas to see my friend, Judith, in hospice. This is part of a poem written for her at that time.

**“Judith,” February 28, 2015**

The hair is brushed back along the gaunt face

By the fingers of each woman who has come to comfort Judith,

And now mine repeat the pattern and trail down the cheekbones.

And her eyes meet my eyes.

Judith, who spent the better part of the last years of her life

Organizing delegations to travel to the border

To meet the women in the colectivos and see how they live,

To understand the dignity of their work,

To show that friendship can run deep through the different languages and cultures.

My smile widened slowly to convey all the love that is in my heart

For this woman who has been an example,

To give the reassurance that her life and her work

Is acknowledged and appreciated,

And her work will continue.

I sang the lyrics that Janet has sent me over our phones.

The other women in the room hold me in the light

As I sing the different verses.

“May the work that I have done speak for me.

May the lives that I have touched speak for me.

May the songs that I have sung speak for me.”

Janet and I sing the same song in honor of Jim Roe at the FOR conference in the summer of 2015, and D'vorah and I have sung "One in a Million" as a grace at FOR, too.

You taught me to sing these songs. You empowered me to stand with the Seattle teachers last fall three days in a row on the picket lines, me leading songs that Jim Douglas and Lou Truskoff wrote lyrics for.

And so now, I'd like to sing a song for you. After rehearsal last winter, I was driving home merging onto I-5, and these words came to me.

[She sings]

"Note by note, the hardest song can be sung, can be sung.

Many chords can form a part, singly none, singly none.

And by doing what we will, hope and courage we instill.

We, the children of Joe Hill.

The work ain't done. The work ain't done."

Thank you again, Seattle Labor Chorus, for teaching me to sing, and for giving me the confidence to sing. It is important work that you do. You have changed my life.